

September 6, 2000: Commission to Testify on State Department Religious Freedom Report

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 6, 2000Contact:

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WHAT: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom will testify Thursday on the State Department's second Annual Report on International Religious Freedom before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee. During the Senate hearing, Robert A. Seiple, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and ex officio member of the Commission, will present the State Department's report. Commissioners John R. Bolton, Firuz Kazemzadeh, and Michael K. Young will testify on behalf of the Commission. Ambassador Seiple and Commissioner Kazemzadeh will testify later in the day during the House hearing.**WHEN and WHERE:**

Senate: Thursday, September 7, 2000 at 9:30 a.m. in room 419 of the Dirksen Building.

House: Thursday, September 7, 2000 at 1:30 p.m. in room 2172 of the Rayburn Building.**BACKGROUND:** On September 5 the State Department issued its second Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. The Commission praises the work of the Department's Office on International Religious Freedom, but urges the Administration and Congress to take a tougher stand towards the worst violators of religious freedom. The full report can be found on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov or at www.state.gov. During the testimony the Commission will discuss a letter it recently sent to National Security Advisor Samuel R. Berger regarding the situation in Sudan. The text of that letter is attached. August 14, 2000Mr. Samuel R. Berger

National Security Advisor

The White House

Washington, DC 20520Dear Mr. Berger:As you know from your meeting with members of our Commission, the situation in Sudan has been a central preoccupation of ours over the last year. Recent reports have greatly increased our concern. Last week various newspapers reported that the UN had suspended relief flights into southern Sudan as a result of bombings conducted by the government of Sudan. Last month we received reports from church leaders in Sudan alleging that needed food aid is still not reaching the so-called "no-go" regions and that the government has been using food aid to force religious conversions. I am writing to (1) express our alarm over these reports, (2) learn more about the relevant facts and current U.S. policy, and (3) follow up on our May 1, 2000 recommendation that the Administration strengthen the Sudan Sanctions Regulations. We respectfully request that you respond to this letter before the end of August, prior to the return of the Congress. Our sense of urgency about Sudan is high. Not only have we received these reports regarding the suspension of relief flights, starvation and disease in the "no-go" regions, and forced conversions, but the government of Sudan apparently is continuing to engage in the bombing of civilian populations and aid centers and to consolidate its ability to do so through the development of the oil fields in southern Sudan. The overall situation seems only to be worsening. First and foremost, we would like to know your assessment of, and the Administration's plans for responding to, the UN suspension of relief flights. How soon is the UN likely to resume flights? What are the prospects for an increase in human suffering in the meantime? What is the Administration doing or planning to do to assure that civilians in southern Sudan will receive the humanitarian aid they need? We have detailed below our concerns about the "no-go" regions, forced conversions, and sanctions. A. Food Aid1. Availability in Non-OLS Areas of SudanThe government of Sudan has long barred the UN's Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) from providing humanitarian aid in some areas of the country. Over the past several months, representatives of the Administration have given assurances that U.S. aid to such areas would be increasing. But church leaders on the ground in the Nuba Mountains and other "no-go" zones report that their people are again dying from starvation and disease and that U.S. humanitarian aid is not being delivered to them. This apparent discrepancy between stated policy and actual practice may be explained by the following finding in the State Department's Interagency Review of U.S. Civilian Humanitarian & Transition Programs (January 2000), Annex 3, p. 4-5:4) Lines of authority and accountability within the U.S.

for some key humanitarian issues related to Sudan

remain unclear. Some examples include:a) The reform and revitalization of OLSOLS's inability to effectively address issues related to access to vulnerable groups has been cause for concern. Lack of access was identified by USAID as a contributing factor to the 1988 [sic] famine. While a U.S. Action Plan called for aggressive efforts at UN/OLS reform, it was unclear to those interviewed for this Case Study how to make this happen. Should the State Department or USAID be in the lead? Is it a UN reform question or a regional, Sudan-specific one? What Agency and what level of staff in that Agency have the authority to engage other donors, the UN and the Sudanese government and rebel movements on this question?The authors of the Interagency Review in their next sentence reached the disturbing conclusion that:No steps have been taken on this important issue, even as access issues again loom as a cause for concern in southern Sudan. At hearings on the United Nations and Africa before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 12, 2000, more than six months after the Interagency Review was issued, United Nations Ambassador Richard Holbrooke acknowledged that he has "never worked on Sudan at all in the UN context." After no less than four Senators raised the issue of the United Nations policy allowing the government of Sudan to veto the delivery of OLS food aid, he then agreed to communicate this concern to the United Nations Secretary General. In identifying religion as a major factor in the conflict raging in Sudan, the Commission stated in its May 1, 2000 report that the Sudan government is committing atrocities at "genocidal"

levels. A principal weapon of the Sudan government has been mass, selective starvation. As a result of Khartoum's banning of delivery flights of international food aid to designated "no-go" areas, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese civilians have already died of hunger and related illnesses. These deaths could have been averted since U.S. aid was available for Sudan. Senator Bill Frist, who has made several fact-finding visits to Sudan, stated at the Senate hearings on July 12 that he "conclude(s) the United Nations has not even put up a struggle to the restrictive terms that have been used to allow these so-called no-go zones." We respectfully ask for an update on the efforts of the United States to assure that humanitarian aid reaches the "no-go" areas, including efforts to resolve the coordination issues highlighted by the Interagency Review. We request your personal engagement to assure appropriate and timely distribution of U.S. humanitarian aid within Sudan, especially to the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile region and other "no go" areas where thousands of lives are at risk.

2. Forced Conversions The Commission has received reports from credible sources that UN-provided humanitarian aid for Sudan, including U.S. aid, is being manipulated to force religious conversions among the country's displaced and needy religious minorities. In mid-July, Sudan's Anglican Bishop Peter Munde of Yambio diocese in southern Sudan and Catholic Bishop Macram Gassis of El Obeid diocese in the Nuba Mountains and northern Bahr al Ghazal reported separately to the Commission that, under the influence of the government of Sudan some relief groups distribute UN aid with the precondition that those receiving the aid convert to Islam. Such coercive practices would directly violate fundamental principles of religious freedom. Bishop Munde attested in a written statement to the Commission as follows: One of the tactics of the NIF government is to force conversion by withholding food for those who will not convert to Islam. My wife, nine children, and I were denied food for four days because we are Christians. I have witnessed people dying from hunger in towns where food is plentiful, especially in Juba town in the south of Sudan. In Juba I have seen food brought in, but after offloading, the food disappears. It is sold at a higher price to people other than those for whom it is intended, or it is withheld from those who will not convert to Islam. According to the two church leaders, a conversion-to-eat policy is routinely enforced in the government-controlled camps outside Khartoum where two million Christian and animist refugees are wholly dependent on international aid. Although we do not know how many people are being affected, both bishops reported that such coerced conversions are "longstanding practices," "common," and "well-known" throughout government-controlled areas in Sudan. They said they have received many reports of such practices from their priests and parishioners who had escaped from the camps. "If you want to eat, you must convert," reported Bishop Gassis about the relief practices in areas of his diocese of El Obeid. The bishops identified [NAME OMITTED] and [NAME OMITTED] as NGOs that engage in such coercive practices. We are deeply disturbed by these reports. We respectfully request that you take urgent action to investigate and put a stop to any use of U.S. humanitarian aid for coercing religious conversion, whether the aid is delivered through the UN or NGOs outside the OLS system, and that you inform us by the end of August of the steps you have taken or plan to take. For your information, we have also brought these reports to the attention of USAID.

B. Strengthening the Sudanese Sanctions Regulations In our May 1 Report, the Commission made recommendations to the President about the ongoing and severe violations of religious freedom in Sudan. We were especially concerned that the accelerating development of the oil fields in Sudan is increasing the ability of the government of Sudan to wage what has become a genocidal war. We urged the President, among other things, to strengthen the economic sanctions against Sudan so as to further restrict the ability of companies that are helping to develop those oil fields from raising capital on the U.S. market. We respectfully request that you provide us with a response to that recommendation. The Commission's recommendations appear in the Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 1, 2000, a copy of which is enclosed. The relevant recommendations are Recommendations 1.8 and 1.9, which provide as follows:

1.8 The United States should prohibit any foreign-organized corporation from obtaining capital in the U.S. markets as long as it is engaged in the development of the oil and gas fields in Sudan, including exploration, extraction, piping or refining.

1.9 In view of the linkage between oil and gas revenues and the human rights violations of the government of Sudan, the United States should mandate that any foreign-organized corporation engaged in the development of the oil and gas fields in Sudan must: (a) in the event it intends to make an IPO in the United States, disclose fully whether or not it intends to use the proceeds of the IPO for development of those oil and gas fields before it may proceed with the IPO; and (b) in the event it is engaged in revenue-generating activities in the United States, submit periodically for public review reports on the nature, extent and duration of its involvement in developing those oil and gas fields and its revenue-generating activities in the United States.

C. Conclusion Because of the urgency and severity of the situation in Sudan, we ask that you respond to this letter by the end of August. I or our Vice-Chairman, Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, would be pleased to respond to any questions you or your staff may have. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely yours, Elliott Abrams
Chairman

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair
Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director